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SIPDIS

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SUBJECT: FIRST RAINS BRING FLOODS TO BANGLADESH,  
PREPARATIONS DEEMED INADEQUATE

1. (SBU) SUMMARY: Despite record-breaking floods during last year's monsoon season, national and local Dhaka governments appear ill prepared to prevent floods this year. Prime Ministerial promises notwithstanding, media and BDG sources report that water pumps have not been upgraded or serviced, solid waste was not removed, drains were not cleaned and illegal structures were not cleared in advance of the summer rains. The recent heavy rain, first of the season, has already resulted in severe flooding and the displacement of thousands of people. END SUMMARY.

2. (U) Several decades ago, the international development community provided technical and procurement assistance to the Bangladeshi government to build dams and install pumps designed to prevent the regular floods Dhaka experiences during the monsoons. Since then, poor maintenance of these systems, inadequate urban planning and intense population pressures, have led to the return of the annual summer floods.

3. (U) This year, though the rains came late, the floods came early. With the first heavy rain, canals in some areas reportedly rose up to four feet above their normal level. Most of the less water-logged areas drained within a few days but some areas were still under significant amounts of water, almost a week later.

4. (SBU) As of June 20, newspapers were reporting that WASA (Water and Sewage Authority) was planning to move up to 15 temporary water pumps to the Dhaka-Narayanganj-Demra area (DND), one of several locations that flooded badly in last year's monsoon. As of July 3, when the first heavy rains of this summer began, these pumps had not been installed. Sources at WASA confirmed July 7 that five of these pumps had only just arrived in DND, and an additional eight had yet to be delivered by the Water Development Board (WDB). None have been installed.

5. (SBU) Newspapers reported that after two days of recent heavy rains, "tens of thousands" of residents were marooned in DND, leaving boats as the only means of transportation through the streets and that many residents fled to stay with relatives in other parts of the city. No deaths have been reported. Despite the flooding, WDB's Executive Engineer Mohammad Alauddin maintains that the situation was 'still under control.'

6. (SBU) Superintendent Engineer for WASA, Kamrul Chowdhury, explained that the pumps were brought to DND only temporarily, despite a perennial need, to prevent their theft if left unattended. Even during the flood season, when need is at its height, piping and parts are taken from the unguarded machines. Chowdhury reported that WASA had applied for Japanese development agency funding for an additional permanent pump in the Dhoikal and Khaliampur areas of the capital and to the World Bank for two additional permanent pumps in Rampura and Kamalapur neighborhoods of Dhaka.

7. (U) The lack of adequate permanent pump facilities is only one element causing the flooding. Debris in and around drains, which are only sporadically cleaned, blocks the drains, sewers, and draining areas leading to pumps. Much of Dhaka's wetlands, which would provide natural drainage, have been filled in for buildings and roads due to an influx of people into the city. Illegal structures block water flow into those rivers, wetlands and canals that have not been filled in or paved over, further compounding flooding conditions.

CHAMMAS